

Washington, DC -- On Saturday, May 19th, U.S. Representatives Michael A. Arcuri (D-Utica) gave the commencement address at SUNY Oneonta, in Oneonta, NY.

**Making Your Mark in Life through Service
SUNY Oneonta Commencement Speech**

Thank you, President Donovan, for that very gracious and kind introduction.

Before I attempt to regale you soon-to-be graduates with inspirational anecdotes and impress your parents with “seize the day” stories of how you can change the world, I should note that I’ve sat through three commencement speeches over the years – high school, college and law school. I remember each of the graduations vividly. But for the life of me, I can’t remember one word of a single commencement speech.

But I can assure you that I will vividly remember this speech – my first commencement speech as a U.S. Congressman. And I’m hopeful, you will too.

It is such an honor to be here with all of you today to celebrate the completion of one important chapter of your lives and begin to write the next.

But what will that next chapter be? Will it be the arts? Will it be service in our armed forces? Will it be on to the working world? Will it be on to graduate school?

Some of you may begin to write the next chapter, get half-way through it, rip up the paper, and decide to start over. Well if that happens, don’t worry. Coming from someone who started out as an attorney in private practice, then became a district attorney, and now a U.S. Congressman – starting over might also lead you to the job of your dreams.

Each of you has the opportunity, as you start to write the next chapter, to make your

mark in life and, more importantly, make your mark toward a better world by sacrificing a little through service to your community.

This is the very substance of humanity – the essence of what we as a people have achieved – and we have achieved it by making sacrifices and striving to make our mark in life through acts of service.

No college commencement speech is ever complete without at least one reference to President John F. Kennedy. I am convinced that is because no president was less impressed with what already had been accomplished, was less concerned with the status quo; and no president was more concerned with what could be, what we as a nation, as a world, could achieve, than JFK.

President Kennedy, who as a junior Senator from Massachusetts wrote a Pulitzer Prize winning book, *Profiles in Courage*, understood better than most how service through sacrifice can benefit the greater good. *Profiles in Courage*, which I encourage each and every one of you to read if you haven't already, is a series of short stories that highlight individuals throughout American history who were willing to sacrifice everything for the greater good in the name of public service. The kind of selfless service -- to country and community -- that was the inspiration for JFK's famous quote, "Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country."

For JFK it wasn't divine inspiration that cultivated his passion and respect for service. If anything, service was the genesis of his world view, which was based on the principle, "to those who much is given, much will be asked."

You soon-to-be graduates of Oneonta have been given much. You are members of a very small, but fortunate group that has been given the opportunity to obtain an exceptional college education and you seized it. Now, are you prepared for what our society will ask of you? Will you answer the call? Do you have the courage and conviction to make the necessary sacrifice in order to make our country stronger, to make the world a better place for your children and your children's children?

Before you answer those questions allow me pose a couple more. What is it that graduation is all about? Is it about being able to finally enter the working world and make some real money? Of course it is.

Is it about being able to go on to graduate school to follow a life-long dream? Of course

it is. We all have those dreams. Those were the dreams of your parents and will be the dreams of your children when you are sitting in the audience watching them get their diplomas.

But here is one more question that I challenge you to ask yourself: Is it about making our community, our country, and our world a better place to live? I would submit that you can all do that by giving back a little through selfless service. Steer clear of the temptation of the "Me Generation" to worry only about what is good for you today. Do what is good for our society tomorrow.

Consider this one quote from John Buchan, otherwise known as Lord Tweedsmuir of Elsfield. Lord Tweedsmuir led an extraordinary life of public service as a noted author, member of the British Parliament, and later, Governor General of Canada.

Yes, I am a self-proclaimed history buff who loves to quote obscure British statesmen.

Lord Tweedsmuir said, "We can only pay our debt to the past by putting the future in debt to ourselves."

As the caretakers of our society, we must sacrifice through service for the greater good. It is a calling we must answer if we the people hope to improve the world for future generations.

Helen Keller said, "I long to accomplish a great and noble task, but it is my chief duty to accomplish small tasks as if they were great and noble."

That's the type of thinking we should all embrace. Because with each small act of service we accomplish through sacrifice, we get one step closer to the greater goal of making the world a better place. And whether it's volunteering at a local soup kitchen, or serving on a not-for-profit board, or tutoring a fellow student; if coupled with other smaller acts of service over time you can have a profoundly positive impact on the world.

And all too often we forget that the highest form of service is done quietly and locally. I'd like to recognize two soon-to-be graduates with us today who regularly make sacrifices and

exemplify the importance of smaller acts of service in their communities that I have been talking about.

Kyra McTighe, who raised over \$34,000 for St. Jude Children's Hospital and Stefanie DeMonaco, who regularly volunteered as a college tutor and spent her limited spare time working at a local animal hospital.

I would also venture to guess that there are many others here with us today who have contributed in their own way to public service – recognized or not.

Each example is proof that every act of service – no matter large or small – can have a profound impact on the world and define you as a person as you attempt to make your mark in life.

As a lawyer in private practice, a district attorney, and now as a congressman, I take time on December 31st each year to sit down with a note pad and write down my accomplishments for the year. Now I don't do this so I can pat myself on the back. And when I say accomplishments, I don't just mean pieces of legislation I, as a Congressman, helped become law. I consider each thing I did to make my community stronger, to make someone else's life better – each act of service that required some sacrifice on my part.

I start the process by asking myself this question, which may sound a little corny, but it's important, and I encourage each of you to do the same: Is the world a better place as a result of what I have or have not done over the past year?

Service isn't about being loud, it isn't about the books that may be written or the money you make or the credit you have – it is about the sacrifices you make and the change you create through service.

As the saying goes, "America is great because she is good. If America ceases to be good, America will cease to be great."

And America is good because Americans have always been able to rise to the occasion and rise to the challenge – answering the call to service.

Service to your community, college, friends, family, and country are the “good” that make America “great.”

No one can force you to serve – the choice is yours. But know that men and women before you were willing to sacrifice much more than will be asked of you, so that you can have that choice.

Don't think about this today – celebrate, enjoy your family and revel in your accomplishments. But tomorrow, or next week, think about how, through selfless service, you too can make your mark on life and make the world a better place.

Congratulations class of 2007, my sincerest heartfelt wishes to each and every one of you. Thank you.

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